

Developing Research-Trained Educators: The South Carolina Reading Initiative

In 1999 the Governor's Institute of Reading established the South Carolina Reading Initiative (SCRI), in partnership with the South Carolina State Department of Education, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the University of South Carolina. SCRI is a staff development initiative intended to reshape reading instruction and improve the academic performance of students throughout the state. Since its inception, the program has worked with more than 4,700 teachers and impacted more than 119,000 students statewide. The program originally focused solely on K–5 instruction, but in 2003 expanded to middle schools, and in 2005 further expanded to include high schools. This expansion was the result of research showing the unique literacy needs of middle and high school students, as well as the poor performance of these groups on reading assessments.

Coaching Teachers and Leaders

The South Carolina Reading Initiative encourages administrators and teachers to study research on reading instruction and reflect on how this relates to their own practice. In order to facilitate this process, each participating school houses a school-based literacy coach (in most instances one coach per school). In some instances, a coach may serve two schools. They work directly with teachers in their classrooms and also lead study groups after school. These study groups are required twice a month and allow teachers and administrators to discuss research on reading instruction and how to apply it in their own classrooms.

School-based literacy coaches are supported by regional literacy coaches. Regional coaches visit their assigned schools each month for follow-up and assistance, providing resources and professional development. They also hold monthly regional meetings where coaches discuss research and reflect on the progress being made in their schools. Both the school and regional coaches meet with state-level SCRI instructors 2 days a month for additional staff development and to reflect on the success they have achieved and challenges they still face.

Coaches are trained over a 4-year period by SCRI instructors, who come from all of the partner organizations. Over this time the coaches earn 36 graduate credit hours in language and literacy instruction. The hours may be used toward an Educational Specialist degree in language and literacy from the University of South Carolina.

SCRI also trains school- and district-level administrators to serve as literacy leaders. Leaders are involved in communicating about literacy initiatives to the public, and developing a vision for the future of literacy at the school and district levels. Each participating school creates a School Leadership Team (SLT) comprised of teachers, administrators, and the media specialist. These teams meet regularly at the school level to discuss the future literacy endeavors, and also attend statewide leadership meeting 4 times a year. The goal of each SLT is to develop a vision for literacy instruction that improves the school and district, and to share this vision with its community. Leadership initiatives are beginning to include a literacy component, which in turn has become a focus for administrator training programs statewide. This better prepares building administrators for the key role they play in supervising reading instruction and instilling the importance of literacy in their schools and districts.

Implementation and Results

SCRI began its implementation for grades K–5 in 2000. In each year of the program, there has been a significant expansion in the number of schools involved. In 2004, SCRI expanded into the middle grades (SCRI-MG) in order to meet the unique literacy needs of middle and high school students. Literacy coaches work with teachers across the curriculum to include literacy instruction in all subject areas. SCRI-MG began with 27 coaches in 40 schools and 23 districts, working with 454 teachers and impacting 36,320 students. SCRI-MG added an additional 25 coaches and 17 districts in 2005. In 2005 SCRI expanded to high schools, with 28 coaches in 24 districts using the middle school program as a template with a similar focus on literacy across subjects. Both the middle and high school programs are in their early stages and therefore lack quantifiable results, yet they hope to build on the program’s successes at the earlier grade levels.

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